



## A Clash of Cultures: Views of the Buffalo

The western plains of Kansas had limited natural resources. In order to survive, the Indians on the high plains were nomadic. They moved from place to place following their most important natural resource, the buffalo.

Many buffalo once roamed the plains—more buffalo than you can probably imagine. The buffalo was very important to the Plains Indians. Francis Parkman, an American historian, lived among the Sioux. In 1849 he wrote,

*The buffalo supplies the Indians with the necessities of life; with habitations, food, clothing, beds and fuel, strings for their bows, flue thread, cordage, trail ropes for their horses, covering for their saddles, vessels to hold water, boars to cross streams, and the means of purchasing all they want from the traders. When the buffalo are extinct, they too must dwindle away.*

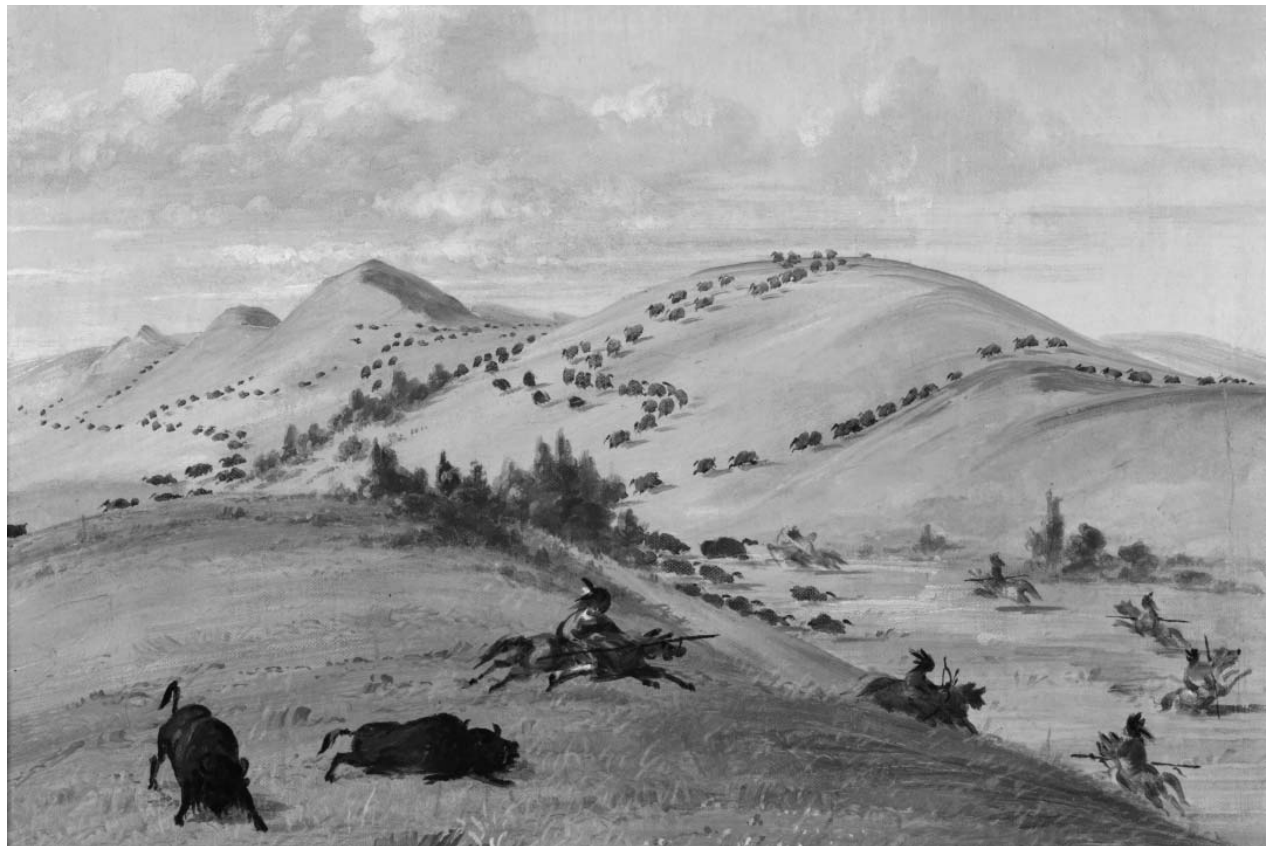
Americans wanted more and more land. The United States government made treaties with the tribes, pushing the Indians into smaller and more confined areas of land. Without the ability to roam, the Plains Indians could no longer follow the buffalo. In October 1867, Comanche chief Ten Bears spoke at the Medicine Lodge Peace Treaty. He said,

*You said that you wanted to put us upon a reservation, to build houses and to make us medicine lodges. I do not want them. I was born upon the prairie, where the wind blew free, and there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I was born where there were no enclosures, and where everything drew a breath. I want to die there, and not within walls. I know every stream and every woods between the Rio Grande and the Arkansas [River]. I have hunted and lived over the country. I lived like my fathers before me, and like them, I lived happily.*

The buffalo was central to the Plains Indians' way of life. They first hunted the buffalo on foot and later on horseback. An Indian would guide his horse alongside the massive creature and using a bow and arrow would shoot it. The women and children had the jobs of cleaning and preparing the buffalo for the many ways it would be used. Tribes hunted only the number of buffalo they needed to provide themselves and their families with food, shelter, clothing, and tools. The Indians on the plains were dependent on the buffalo for survival.

As white settlers pushed west, so did the railroads. Professional buffalo hunters were hired by the railroads to kill the animals with high-powered rifles. Some of the buffalo meat was used to feed the large crews working on the railroads but most of it was wasted. The buffalo skins could be sold for cash if shipped east on the railroad. Using long-range rifles hunters would kill a large number of buffalo in a day.

Over time the hunters began to deplete the buffalo herds. It is estimated that in 1800 there were around 60 million buffalo in North America. That number had fallen to around 750 by the end of the century.



*This painting depicts Sioux Indians hunting buffalo.*